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Using a Rural Place to Localize a Curriculum: The Red Cloud Project

Karen Eifler
*University of Nebraska
at Kearney*



Karen Eifler

Prairie Grass

*People wandering around in the grass
Realize concrete isn't so great.
Around in the country
Rabbits and deer pass.
I quietly ponder earth's fate
Every person must do their part.*

*Grasses, streams, trees and animals are needed
Rivers, streams I never seen I found in my backyard.
Always thought the plains were dull.
Suddenly found prairie grass
Suddenly learned of my past.*

Jared, 4th grade

Jared got it.

His enthusiastic, poetic response to a day spent participating in the first-ever Red Cloud Project suggests that this joint venture of the College of Education and the History Department at the University of Nebraska at Kearney has a bright future. This article is a brief glimpse at a program that is still in its infancy, but has the potential to fill some critical gaps in the pre-service preparation of teachers headed for rural schools and in learning opportunities for present and future rural students in the state of Nebraska.

Specifically, this program is one which fosters in students and teachers an appreciation of a local rural community as a principal source of history, literature, and natural science curriculum. Red Cloud, Nebraska is a village of just over 1200 residents. It was for some years the home of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather and the inspiration for most of her greatest, most authentic stories. Additionally, the banks of the Republican River, which courses through Red Cloud, are a rich source of fossils, everything from 100 million

year old ammonites to sharks, mastodons and pre-historic horses. The Pawnee Indians established a strong culture in the region, as did native people pre-dating the Plains tribes.

Despite this diverse and stimulating heritage, however, many students and even adults are unaware of the rich, complex "texts" around them. It is likely that many rural communities in the country have similar resources available as avenues of investigation for students. One way to help youngsters value their histories and to make theoretical scientific concepts more concrete is to localize those things and in doing so, make them more real, more urgent. In the Red Cloud Project, preservice teachers are trained to use the tools available within the community as cornerstones of the school curriculum. Clearly, only a tiny fraction of our education graduates would ever expect to teach in Red Cloud itself, but the majority of those who remain in Nebraska will be teaching rural areas, each of which will have a unique history, literature, geology and biology. The insights and skills they acquire working in this project are meant to be transferable to their future teaching careers.

The work of teacher educators (university faculty, school administrators and classroom teachers) affiliated with the Red Cloud Project is to help preservice teachers consider the educational potential of a rural area and act upon that knowledge to develop meaningful field-based learning opportunities for youngsters in several curricular areas. Teachers currently working in rural schools may well recognize the potential of this work and adapt it to their own local situation. Administrators in rural schools will also learn from this article that, as logical as using a location to help frame curriculum may seem, it is an acquired skill, just like any other teaching method. Those undertaking this work need training to even begin, as well as support through their first attempts to localize parts of a curriculum.

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The Red Cloud Project began about five years ago when the town of Red Cloud needed to tear down one of its schools. Some enterprising senior citizens who saw the large pile of salvageable materials used them to construct a spacious facility adjacent to the Webster County Historical Museum. Their vague dream, identified by the first name they gave the building, "The Land and its People," was to house a center for helping present and future citizens of Red Cloud understand the intimate connections between the geography of the place and the people who homesteaded its soil, wrote its literature and created its history. There was also an urge to make this enterprise put Red Cloud on the map. Like so many Nebraska towns not on the interstate highway, the population of Red Cloud has dwindled in the last ten years and aged as well. A major industry in the town is the Willa Cather Foundation; her childhood home and sites of many portions of her novels comprise a tour which attracts literary tourists in large numbers each spring. However, it's a long time between the annual Cather conferences and these citizens wanted to pay tribute to other south Nebraskan legacies.

They brought this vague vision to the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, which in turn passed the opportunity on to several departments at the university. The art department used the building to showcase student work and that of other Nebraska artists. The English department made several attempts to expand upon the Cather connection. Although these exhibits were enjoyed by all who attended, there were not the connecting threads that come from an integrated, consistent program. The ninety mile distance between Kearney and Red Cloud was also problematic in sustaining ongoing programs.

In 1993, several pieces of the puzzle began to come together. What was necessary was a program that by its nature could both call on the unique geographic, historical and literary heritage of Red Cloud and serve the teaching needs of the University an hour and a half away. This author was asked to devise such a program, with few limitations except budget and time. The idea was to use the Land and Its People site as a laboratory for preservice teachers to design and implement integrated field studies for school age children. At the time of the proposal, the University of Nebraska at Kearney was endeavoring to forge the kinds of partnerships between the College of Education and local schools as envisioned by John Goodlad. At the same time, the College of Education was considering new ways to help its own students prepare for meaningful, substantive teaching careers in rural schools. The Red Cloud Project was a promising place to begin. Professors in the college methods and practicum courses had already established good working relationships with the faculties of a local elementary and middle school; this project would build upon those bonds.

The process began with informal conversations with secondary social science methods students about missing links they perceived in their preparation for teaching in rural schools. Although all of the students indicated they wanted to use field trips extensively in their professional careers, when pressed, they had little or no idea of what that might entail. At that point, the project went beyond simply teaching in and around Red Cloud to providing training in drafting parental consent forms and securing a bus for transportation. The preservice teacher who wrote the first consent form was pushed by the cooperating principal to write three drafts before one was acceptable, both legally and descriptively. Rosie reported her amazement at being told to leave out the statement "Students may get dirty during their participation in this field study, as we will be in a field for a large portion of the day," which the principal found potentially worrisome for parents. For all the preservice teachers involved, this was their first practical experience with the issues of liability and accountability between school administration and parents; indeed, Rosie solved something that had been a mystery to her, which was what principals' roles were in the running of schools.

Todd was assigned the task of securing a bus, another deceptively convoluted job. This entailed working through the district Bus Barn, which he knew ahead of time and assumed would require just a phone call to make the reservation. Not so. It became an ordeal of coordinating several calendars (particularly since we had as yet no track record) and negotiating with coaches from three sports who all needed bus transportation to games and meets at the time we would be coming back from Red Cloud. Both Rosie and Todd wrote up their experiences in the form of "how-to" documents for their colleagues in the methods course from whom the volunteers for the project were drawn. This process has become a valuable educational part of the Red Cloud experience. After each venture, volunteers compile a list of "truths" they have learned about taking students on field trips and share them with other preservice teachers. Some are humorous: "Never ever believe a weatherman's prediction for the day of the trip," while some offer profound insight: "Some kids with special needs or problems can shine on a field trip, away from the artificial confines of a classroom." We have sought at all costs to train the preservice teachers to avoid a "pancake syrup" approach to these field studies. That means a day where an experience such as a museum gets "poured on" students, without any attention to context or integration into the students' existing curriculum. The framework which has evolved is to break the volunteers and the students into learning teams. The volunteers, working in teams of three or four, are given the charge to develop a day's worth of experiences which incorporate at least three curricular areas. Typically these have been natural science, using

the prairie land on the outskirts of town as the "text", along with social studies and language arts.

A small family cemetery ten miles south of town provides the setting for a large portion of the latter two. Grave markers are a rich source of data for investigating local history and connecting it to national and world events; rubbings of particularly ornate markers are a popular activity, as are investigations into decades with high infant mortality, periods associated with wars and the effects of weathering on the many kinds of materials used to make the markers. Students have explored ages of parents at the birth of their first child, average age of death in various decades and family sizes during different eras. Preservice teachers use the land to inspire students to create their own poems, stories and historical narratives. Abandoned farmhouses on the way to the various sites provide fodder for speculation about what historical and/or natural forces caused people to uproot families, to homestead, eventually build ornate homes and then flee the land. The students' own teachers set the stage for these activities by using relevant histories and stories in their classes before and after the trip to Red Cloud.

The school children themselves are also broken into learning teams of no more than eight, and each one of these then is assigned to one of the volunteer teams. This ensures plenty of supervision out in the field and a small student to teacher ratio. Because the learning groups are small, there is more time spent investigating, reporting and creating than tending to class management issues. The teams are intact for the entire day and because each team of volunteers designs a different day for their students, there is virtually no duplication of activities. Preservice teachers have been surprised on occasion when the regular classroom teachers ask how this or that behaviorally disordered student has fared so far; because of the engaging nature of the learning experiences and the amount of individual attention volunteers are able to expend, students do not act out the negative behaviors which might emerge in a conventional school setting.

Volunteers have been the inspiration of the Red Cloud Project. They plan pioneer cookouts and teach the children games from 150 years ago. They have found a farmer who has an authentic covered wagon and persuaded him to take their learning teams for a ride (something that is clearly possible with eight students and not feasible with the whole group of 80 who come in a day!) One group of young men spent the entire day with their team constructing a Pawnee style earth lodge, teaching students how to choose their own names in the Native American manner and helping students create Plains Indian style artwork. Another team led their students to write, costume, act and film an original pioneer drama (which, admittedly, contained quite a bit of good-

natured humor). This document of their day was not only marvelously entertaining when the whole class got to see it back at school, it was an excellent accountability tool for everyone on both volunteer and student teams. The final example of volunteer ingenuity has implications for the entire nature of the Red Cloud Project and other enterprises which use a local community as a source of curriculum.

Remember the citizens who salvaged the materials which eventually became the Land and its People building? One preservice teacher was so inspired by their initiative and love for their town that she designed a promising oral history endeavor to record their stories. She initiated contact with one of the men and told him that she would like to record what he knew about Red Cloud. If he knew of any other seniors in the town who would like to be part of this, he was welcomed to bring them along. Then the preservice teacher worked with her group of eighth graders, training them to ask engaging questions and conduct respectful, interesting interviews with these people. Although it was a brief part of the day, it was gratifying to the citizens of Red Cloud to have their experiences valued and recorded. The classroom teachers provided follow-up by allowing oral history projects to be used in subsequent assignments. Summaries of the New Journalism techniques, ethnography and oral history are used to prepare student teachers.

As part of our effort to avoid this day turning into a "one shot deal," each Red Cloud Project day is videotaped by another volunteer, who is charged with finding each learning team and recording highlights and conducting interviews with students, volunteers and teachers. This tape is shown back at the school site later to the classes who have participated, administrators and parents with questions. Students come to realize that not everything makes it into the final recording and teachers use that new knowledge to encourage oral language development through telling exercises, writing activities and simple debriefing conversations. Photos taken on the trip become bulletin boards. One class even produced its own talk show, "Geraldo on the Range," in which participants assumed different historical personages to summarize what they had learned about life during the Homestead period. Students who ride in the covered wagon over rugged farmland have new appreciation for the pioneers which they are quick to share with interviewers.

Not only is one day never the same as another; even students from the same class who go on the same day have a myriad of different experiences. Each time something new is learned. The team approach appears to be effective, allowing variety and maximum participation from students. However, not all volunteers are equally talented or prepared. There have been volunteers who chose to provide very little structure, allow-

ing students to wander aimlessly, with few tools of accountability for their time. These teams did experience discipline problems, not surprisingly. It was difficult for those students to see the well-planned, challenging activities in which other teams were engaged and not act out some frustrations.

It points out one valuable dimension of the Red Cloud Project. This is not only a community based education for students, but also preservice training for potential teachers before they first enter classrooms as student teachers. The debriefing exercises at each day's conclusion are one expression of that mission. But the raw panic that grips unprepared volunteers when they realize that their students need direction and stimulation virtually ensures that they will take care to prevent such an experience from happening again. That profound impact can be discussed in a textbook, but can never be appreciated except through experience. It is this experiential dimension of the Red Cloud Project which puts it in a position unique from other equally worthy community based education projects in rural Nebraska.

In the future, certain areas will be strengthened. Adolescents have not been as receptive to the day as younger children (grades 3-5) and there is a need to restructure to accommodate their different needs. One possibility is to use part of their time during the field study day to train them to conduct a Red Cloud Project themselves for younger students in the district. This inter-age approach has much to recommend it. It certainly reflects the current interest in forming partnerships among all the people involved in all aspects of education. Preservice teachers who participate in this version of the Red Cloud Project would then have some

of the skills they would need in the future to help their older students in rural schools develop their own local investigations. In turn, those older students could turn those investigations into field experiences for the younger students in their community. This camaraderie and sharing of knowledge would go a long way towards planting a sense of place in youngsters, a sense that a small town is not only a good place to be from, but to return to.

It is important to offer more substantial follow up materials for the teachers who bring their students to Red Cloud for the day. Until now, teachers have wanted to shadow their students and simply see what is going on, admire the beauty of the town and its environment. Now that teachers are returning for second and third visits and everything is not so new, a logical step is to spend more time with them, preparing materials and providing them with access to the same resources the education students have. For preservice teachers who have participated in this program, no day has ever been long enough. Classroom teachers could have a chance to build upon in their classrooms what the learning teams began in the field. They could also construct their own local curriculum projects based upon the lessons they learn in Red Cloud. Again, one constant in this approach to teacher education has been a deepening of all participants' desires to know more about their own local community, and then to apply what they have learned through further investigations and improved classroom practices.

Jared is the first of many Red Cloud Project veterans to get it.